

from The Hollow Men (1925)

T. S. Eliot (1888–1965)

We are the hollow men
 We are the stuffed men
 Leaning together
 Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
 Our dried voices, when
 We whisper together
 Are quiet and meaningless
 As wind in dry grass
 Or rats' feet over broken glass
 In our dry cellar

Shape without form, shade without colour,
 Paralysed force, gesture without motion;

Those who have crossed
 With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom
 Remember us—if at all—not as lost
 Violent souls, but only
 As the hollow men
 The stuffed men.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

*In the Nick of Time***What Is Conservatism?**

Kevin T. Bauder

After the Second World War, three thinkers established an intellectual foundation for modern conservatism in America. The philosophical case for conservatism was articulated by Richard M. Weaver in his book *Ideas Have Consequences*. The link between political and economic freedom was established by Friedrich Hayek in his volume *The Road to Serfdom*. A comprehensive history of the development of conservative thought came from the pen of Russell Kirk in *The Conservative Mind*. These three authors were later joined by William F. Buckley who, in addition to providing further development of conservative ideas, established the vehicles through which these ideas were popularized. Among these were *National Review*, a journal of opinion, and *Firing Line*, a television show that appeared on the Public Broadcasting Service. Buckley also sponsored the *Firing Line Debates*, bringing together people from all sides of the political spectrum for reasoned conversation about the ideas and issues that divided them.

One thing that made Buckley's work possible was that Russell Kirk had distilled a functional definition of conservatism. This definition, synthesized out of his exhaustive reading of the Western intellectual tradition, came to operate as a kind of *sine qua non* for American conservatism. It still does. The degree to which people are genuinely conservative can be gauged by comparing their ideas and actions to Kirk's definition. All of us who think of ourselves as conservatives are well advised to keep Kirk's definition in mind.

The original definition was presented in six points. In subsequent presentations, the number of points varied, but the content remained the same. The following is a paraphrase and summary of the features that Kirk, and whole generations of conservatives following him, found definitive for their movement.

First, conservatives believe in a transcendent and knowable moral order. This moral reality, which is accessible through both natural law and divine law, is reflected in the structure of the world itself. To defy this moral order is to defy reality. We cannot ultimately break it; it will break us. Political and social systems that ignore this moral order will bring disaster upon all who live under their influence.



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Second, conservatives delight in the varieties of human expression that develop naturally and organically as people interact with their environment and each other. The genuine diversity of callings, perspectives, and cultures—including regional and local cultures—is something that conservatives love. They distinguish this genuine diversity, however, from the oppressive and false diversity that is enforced artificially and grows from abstract theories about the “way things ought to be.” Such false diversity results in a stultifying and suffocating uniformity of opinion and condition in which true diversity is crushed. Such false diversity results in a bland sameness that arises from the top-down imposition of the same things everywhere.

Third, conservatives embrace variations of condition as necessary to human flourishing. People differ in interests, advantages, ambition, industry, and opportunities. These differences naturally produce inequalities of condition. The fact that some people enjoy greater status, wealth, power, and privilege, while others enjoy less, does not necessarily point to injustice. A classless society is an impossibility in the real world. When classes and orders are artificially eliminated, their place is inevitably taken by oligarchies of elite theorists.

Fourth, conservatives perceive that human freedom is closely linked to the protection of property. The ability to expropriate property, especially without due process of law, implies the ability to take life. Property must be protected, not because such protections are convenient for the wealthy, but because the secure possession of property is a transcendental right. Where the right to property is not fully protected, justice can never be fully implemented.

Fifth, conservatives place considerable faith in traditions, forms, customs, and prescriptions as practical guides. They recognize that traditions can be flawed, and they do not oppose thoughtful and prudent change. They affirm, however, that traditions and customs have been worked out as practical methods of checking the worst human impulses and appetites. Consequently, conservatives distrust social, economic, and moral innovators and experimenters. Behind such innovation and experimentation, conservatives glimpse the will to power and the willingness to oppress.

Sixth, and arising out of the previous consideration, conservatives understand that change is not always helpful, and it may sometimes do irreparable damage to social, economic, and moral systems. They insist, therefore, that change should occur deliberately, prudently, and in such a way that it operates as a means of preserving what is best. Radical and rapid restructurings are seen by conservatives as social wildfires. The virtue of prudence must govern even good and necessary changes.

These are the six defining points that Kirk includes in *The Conservative Mind*. Later and in other places he teases out other points, the most important of which is the recognition of human limitations. Neither human beings nor human social orders are perfectible. We are so deeply flawed that none of us can be trusted with too much power. Checks and balances are indispensable, and those who amass power to build utopias will inevitably lead us into calamity.

This last principle is especially worth remembering during times of good leadership. When leaders are doing the right things, we face a temptation to loosen the checks and balances so that these leaders can do more of what is right. We must never forget, however, that good leaders will be followed by bad, sooner or later. The exercise of checks and balances under good leadership is the best preparation for their exercise under bad.

Kirk’s understanding of conservatism is as useful today as it was when he first published it. When we prepare to vote in an election, we consider many factors for each candidate. For example, we should judge the candidates’ character, competence, courage, prudence, temperance, ability to govern, and their stated positions on a variety of issues. Perhaps most importantly we should evaluate the principles to which the candidates swear allegiance. To merit enthusiastic support, any candidate should embody the principles of conservatism.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
